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SALT II: The Opening Salvo

The basic agreement with the Soviet Union on strategic arms limitation announced by the White House is five years overdue. When President Carter and Chairman Brezhnev sign SALT II within a few weeks, Mr. Carter will have concluded the negotiation that was begun in such high hopes by President Nixon and pursued diligently by President Ford, and was counted by both as among their greatest achievements in foreign policy and world survival.

SALT II is part of a process that really began with the agreement in 1963 to establish a "hotline" and includes the atmospheric nuclear test and germ warfare prohibitions among ten major agreements, and that is nowhere near ended. One of the greatest virtues of SALT II completion is that it resumes progress in constraining the development of world-destructive weapons. The greatest evil flowing from its possible rejection would be the likelihood of halting this progress through another generation of weapons. Without SALT II there cannot be a SALT III nor, probably, a European troop reduction or similar agreement. The meaning of SALT II is much greater than its content.

That content is not inconsiderable. It is largely known, and will properly be scrutinized to the Nth detail in one of the most important debates the Senate will ever hold. Were a Senate vote held today, the still undrafted agreement would probably fail to achieve ratification. But until now the debate has been largely one-sided, dominated by opponents. Publication of the treaty is likely to open the heavy guns of the proponents, who have been silent because until now their adversaries have been the Soviet negotiators.

SALT II will channel but certainly not end the competition of the superpowers in developing strategic

weapons. It will reduce Soviet hardware somewhat, and hold American development expenditures below what they would become in the absence of restraints on the Russians. But this is its least significant aspect. It introduces restraints on the quality of weapons development, and as a great precedent it enshrines intelligence as a major pillar of world security.

There are many areas of rivalry left uncovered by SALT II. The "loophole" most likely to disturb hawks in the Kremlin, for instance, is that it does not cover American weapons based in Europe. There are plenty of omissions that by themselves should disturb Americans as well. That is why it is vital to go on to SALT III.

The greatest risk inherent in SALT II is that it is the last gasp of a fading Brezhnev leadership. Mr. Brezhnev's mortality leaves to his unknown successors the options of maintaining, enlarging or abandoning his arms control policies. Although the character of Soviet-American relations in the post-Brezhnev era cannot accurately be predicted, the best bet is that they will continue to be as bad and distrustful as they have been during his imperial reign.

In other words, the SALT process will remain as important as it has been. For the real linkage of SALT should not be to trust and co-operation but to their absence. Strategic arms limitation is not a substitute for power rivalry but a way of civilizing it. We do not need a SALT with Britain, which also possesses the means of destroying our cities. We do need a SALT with the Soviet Union, unless we possess the public and congressional resolve to spend it into the dust, which is exceedingly doubtful. This is the imperative against which the possible defects of this particular SALT II must be examined in the Senate.